KURTZMAN REVISITED

Your ideas are the strength of your work. There are lots of people who can scribble a picture, but it is your insight into people that will set you apart.

Harvey Kurtzman

I first heard about Harvey Kurtzman from Roger Brand at his house in Point Richmond, California. Roger had inked for Wally Wood for a short time before becoming involved with his Strawbrick Character in THE EAST VILLAGE OTHER. I had gone to Brand's place to interview him for one of the series of underground comix reports I was doing for the LOS ANGELES FREE PRESS. Roger was the ultimate comics historian and he had a library of books that would have put any local library to shame. He showed me the seminal works by people like Becker and Feiffer, but the man he talked about most was Harvey Kurtzman. My own interest in comics was marginal at that time. I had collected comic books as a kid, lost them during the war, collected again in the late forties, and lost interest when I started dating girls. I was in the Navy during the mid-fifties and I had paid no attention to EC comix or MAD so Kurtzman's name meant nothing to me.

Roger talked about him as though he were a God just as he talked about Fredric Wertham as though he were the devil. I looked at the books and listened. Roger had copies of TWO-FISTED TALES and FRONTLINE COMBAT, two EC titles which Kurtzman had reshaped into realistic war comics. No GI JOE or SERGEANT FURY here. In Kurtzman's comics, war was bad news and there were few heroes, just poor guys who got caught in the machinery of history. MAD was great stuff. I had seen the magazine on the stands, of course, but had never seen the comic books done by Kurtzman from 1950-56.

At that time, those MAD COMICS were not readily available in comic book form, but there were second-hand paperback editions around, so I made it a point to read some of them and to look for other work done by Kurtzman. It's all listed in Glenn Bray's HARVEY KURTZMAN INDEX, but that reference work was not available then, and it's out of print now.

I kept running into EC fallout as I did the interviews for my FREEP pieces. From Brand I went to Gary Arlington's store in San Francisco's Mission district. An ex-army supply sergeant, Gary had two complete sets of EC comic books which he was using to trade for artwork by various underground artists to be published in his BOGEYMAN or SAN FRANCISCO COMIC BOOK titles. It was Gary who promoted EC to the artists. He was responsible for naming EC revivalist comic books like SKULL and SLOW DEATH FUNNIES though these were published by other companies. Gary had a few ECs hanging on the wall of his store and he let me read them. I remember in 1973 when Bill Gaines was on a book tour touting Frank Jacobs' THE MAD WORLD OF WILLIAM M. GAINES I tried to get Gary and Gaines together for a meeting, but it didn't work out. Bob Beerbohm, the owner of Best of Two Worlds, went along with me to the Clift Hotel the afternoon I interviewed Gaines. I invited Gary, but he wouldn't come. I did introduce Gaines to Ron Turner, the publisher of Last Gasp Comix, and they talked briefly over the phone. What I didn't know at that time was that Gaines had told Gary he couldn't do any more of the mock EC covers he was printing as part of his Nickel Library. Gary had folks like Larry Todd, Jaxon, Jim Osborne, Charlie Dallas, and others doing covers of gory subjects in what he considered the true spirit of EC. Gaines said he was sorry, but it was violation of his copyright and Gary had to cease and desist.

There is a full chapter in the GAINES bio by Frank Jacobs [1972] which discusses Harvey Kurtzman and his work with EC. He is presented as a creative man who had to have things his own way, one who did not have a lot of patience with artists who deviated from his detailed layouts. Kurtzman was as slow as Al Feldstein was fast, but Gaines paid page rates, which meant Feldstein was making a lot more money for turning out horror stories than Kurtzman was on his meticulously researched war books. "Kurtzman played tortoise to Feldstein's hare," as Jacobs put it, "but at EC slow and steady did not win the race."

Clearly, Kurtzman, who preferred to work at home rather than at the office and who hated having anything changed once he had it down on the tissue, was not cut out to be an employee. He had to be his own man and he was not destined to remain under the tight control of big daddy Gaines. They parted company shortly after the beginning of MAD and Kurtzman began his series of beginnings going from TRUMP with Hugh Hefner to HUMBUG with some of his EC artist buddies to HELP! with Jim Warren and ultimately to what was to become America's ultimate comic parody strip, LITTLE ANNIE FANNY which ran in PLAYBOY for over twenty years.

Kurtzman brought honesty to the comics world. Instead of a fantasy world of super soldiers casually machine-gunning hundreds of Asian non-humans, his soldiers were real guys from Michigan or North Dakota out there in real mud in the heat of real battles and they were not destined to wipe out whole enemy platoons single handed and be rewarded with movie contracts. Whether or not realism is apropos in a medium that was heroic fantasy is often debated, but Kurtzman had the strength and the charisma to push

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his concept into the public eye. As Jacobs commented: "Kurtzman's wars were not events to be romanticized (82)."

As for MAD, Kurtzman got into something no one else was doing at the time. It is not true that he was the first to parody the comics, because, of course, Al Capp had been parodying Dick Tracy as Fearless Fosdick long before MAD, and newspaper cartoonists often joked with one another by making fun of each other's characters. The Harvard Lampoon and other college humor magazines parodied comic characters, so there were a number of precedents, but Kurtzman broadened the range and scope of parody by assimilating aspects of contemporary life into his deflations of Mickey Mouse and Archie and Superman. Kurtzman always considered MAD his baby, but it was a team effort and certainly Bill Elder, Wally Wood, Jack Davis, and numerous others deserve a lot of credit for making the magazine what it is visually. Gaines said, "Kurtzman started MAD. Feldstein made it a commercial success. Giving Harvey credit for MAD is like giving Robert Fulton credit every time a new ocean liner is launched (38)." Jacobs said "If Kurtzman's name is more of a household word today than Feldstein's, it is partly because Feldstein has made little effort to mingle with his peers in the publishing world. Kurtzman, despite being what he calls a *super private person* is friendly with numerous editors and writers of the literary establishment. Feldstein seldom fraternizes with anyone connected with MAD. He tunes in to his work in the morning and tunes out at night (38-9)."

Gaines considered Kurtzman a traitor when he left EC and raided the art staff, getting Davis and Wood and Elder to work with him on TRUMP. Kurtzman had to sue Gaines to get his royalties on the paperback MAD books and even though he settled out of court, Gaines never thought Harvey should have gotten the money. The main artistic schism between the two men was over the horror comics (1950-54). Kurtzman didn't like them. He thought they were sick and shouldn't be sold to children. Gaines defended them before the Senate. Kurtzman told Gary Groth in 1981: "from a Freudian perspective, they were questionable–the business of playing with dead bodies–stories about chopping up people into baseball fields and making their intestines into a Christmas ribbon. That's not the kind of thing I liked to subject my child to (TCJ 67, Oct, 1981, p. 83)."

In response to this and Kurtzman's long term participation in LITTLE ANNIE FANNY, a woman friend of mine said, "well, how about the horror of young women depilated, given breast implants and plastic surgery, photographed nude, then airbrushed and laid out like corpses in the center of a national magazine? What about that horror story? You could call it MEAT MARKET." Since Kurtzman sees Annie as a vehicle for a broad socio-cultural satire, he might be surprised to know that many young women see her as a monster.

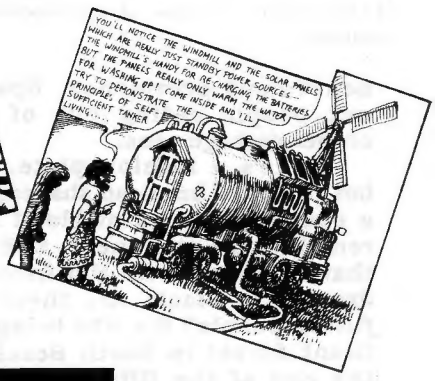
Kurtzman had to leave EC just as a son has to leave his father. He had to form his own organization. His subsequent magazines have became cultic, particularly among the younger generation of cartoonists who tried to revived their spirit via underground comix. BIJOU did a parody of the first MAD in the seventies and in the eighties the image of that book was still being recycled. Jim Williams put it on his mini-comic WAD. It was Kurtzman who suggested the idea of underground comics and Robert Crumb who picked it up. The idea appeared as a parody news item blacklined COMICS GO UNDERGROUND on the cover of MAD 16, this, of course, in relation to the Comics Code being adopted by the comics industry in 1954. Kurtzman stated the underground philosophy well in MY LIFE AS A CARTOONIST (New York: Pocket Books, 1988): "I think a comic story is better when all parts come from one person, some one who has the vision of the whole story and knows what he wants (4)." Nearly all underground comic stories were done this way in contrast to the assembly line system used by Marvel and DC.

I became acquainted with Harvey Kurtzman when I invited him to Berkeley as the featured guest of my Underground '76 convention. He did the logo for COMIX WORLD 25 which was run on t-shirts for the con by Joel Milke. He was the one person most of the underground artists wanted to see and I knew they didn't have the money to go to New York to see him, so I brought him to Berkeley. In the late seventies and early eighties he has attended many comic conventions around the country, teaching seminars on technique and talking about his career as a cartoonist and humorist.

MY LIFE AS A CARTOONIST is aimed at teenage would-be cartoonists and contains a lot of basic information. I thought it was cute that Kurtzman excluded his work with Hefner at PLAYBOY, since I would have a hard time finding a teenager who didn't know about ANNIE FANNY. Gee, Harv, most kids these days have seen X-rated movies either on their family vcr or on that of a vacationing neighbor. As for the horror, FRIDAY THE 13th is a tv series and the gore in today's horror films makes Jack Davis's old baseball story sound like the original CASEY AT THE BAT. You gotta SEE what's happening on the mall, Harv. Hey, come on up to the lab, and see what's on the slab.

Comics history is still in its infancy. I checked references to Kurtzman for this piece and they are pretty scarce and seldom informed. Though MAD and EC had been around for years, Stephen Becker didn't index Kurtzman in COMIC ART IN AMERICA (1959). George Perry mentions him in relation to ANNIE FANNY in THE PENGUIN BOOK OF THE COMICS (rev. 1971) and gives MAD credit as the origin of the parody comic. In COMICS: ANATOMY OF A MASS MEDIUM (1971), Reinhold Reitberger and Wolfgang Fuchs refer to Kurtzman as "the spiritual father of MAD (216)," and "the man who decisively determined the style of humour and satire in the USA after 1950 (218)." Jerry Robinson doesn't mention Kurtzman in his 1974 THE COMICS, nor does the Couperie-Horn HISTORY OF THE COMIC STRIP. Ron Goulart gives only token treatment to MAD in his GREAT HISTORY OF COMIC BOOKS (1986), a book with no references or bibliography. National Lampoon editor Tony Hendra suggests that MAD was a reaction to Fredric Wertham's crusade against the comics. In GOING TOO FAR (1987), he praised Kurtzman as "one of the recurrent influences on Boomer humor (82). . .MAD was his most important achievement. In the harsh climate of the fifties it is now possible to see that there was perhaps room for only one fountainhead of impudent print humor. Had Kurtzman remained at it's head, there is no telling how much better it might have become than it did (82)."

YOU'VE BEEN TO NUM BUM'S PEACE 'POETRY READING', HAVEN'T YOU, RUSSELL? I'D HAVE LOVED TO HAVE GONE, BUT WE COULDN'T GET IT TOGETHER. I BET IT WAS JUST AMAZING!
GIVE EVE A BIG HUG AND YOU CAN HAVE SOME OF MY BITTER.
AAGH! SHE'S EXPLOITING MY WEAKNESS!


YOU'LL NOTICE THE WINDMILL AND THE SOLAR PANELS WHICH ARE REALLY JUST STANDBY POWER SOURCES. BUT THE WINDMILL'S HANDY FOR RECHARGING THE BATTERIES FOR WASHING UP! COME INSIDE AND I'LL TRY TO DEMONSTRATE THE PRINCIPLES OF SELF-SUFFICIENT TANKER LIVING.....

I CAN'T SEE WHY THEY COULDN'T HAVE GOT SOMETHING LIKE THIS TOGETHER ON THE OFFICIAL SITE — IT WOULD ONLY HAVE TAKEN A COUPLE OF WINDMILLS TO POWER IT!
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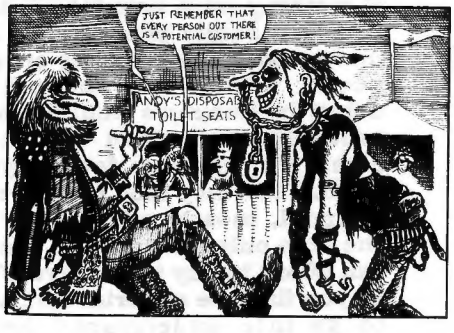
AND RIDDLE-ME-TOOT, AT THE WITCHING HOUR, THE WORTHY TOOTHER CREPT INTO HER BOWER, WITH A FAL-DE-RAL-TOOT AND A RIDDLE-ME-FAL-
JESUS! WHAT SORT OF FESTIVAL IS THIS? WHERE'S THE P.A. SYSTEM? WHERE'S THE STACKS, THE SOUNDS, THE LIGHTS, THE WORK THING?

I loved these BIG BANG comic books from England. First time I have seen a cartoonist really get down and parody the whole hippy New Age trip without restraint. Shelton did it a bit in his Freak Brothers strip and I suggest you intellectuals compare his work with BIG BANG.



COMIX PLUGOLA

Hey, a cartoonist has as much right as anyone else to make political statements. This is still a democracy, huh? Then how come the Denver POST and several other papers dropped Cathy Guisewipe's strips which were critical of George Bush? THE DAILY OKLAHOMAN dropped her entirely. I was glad to see her stop talking about her weight and those endless diets and get into something really heavy for a change. George Bush was much more interesting as the invisible man in DOONESBURY than he has been as a sneering presidential candidate staging one of the most dishonest and currupt campaigns in U. S. history. If the 1988 campaign did nothing else, it revealed the total corruption of the majority of our major tv networks and newspapers. All those Republican owned entities dropped all pretense of objectivity and campaigned openly for Bush and his vapid golf-playing buddy-cum-VP. My favorite news clip was the one that showed Mike Dukakis bowling his bowl down the gutter. This was followed up with a shot of Bush as elder statesman touring a munitions factory, the clod versus the great warrior. What a farce! These are leaders?

Which raises the question about what ever happened to underground cartooning? What happened to those guys who used to go on the graphic offensive, to go for the jugular? It's been a while since I've seen anything in the comix that really hit the nail on the head. Where are those guys? Why are there no underground newspapers these days? What is the younger generation doing? Hey, if the current establishment isn't corrupt enough for you, what is? I don't know. Crumb seems to have drifted into suburban life. Maybe everyone's dead. Or out trying to save the whales while the country gets ripped off and sold to foreign powers.

It's a cold December here in Berkeley. I'm on Telegraph Avenue in Cafe Bottega. I'm drinking some tea and watching the passing parade. See lots of young people with expensively shaved heads and hairdos. Leather clothes. These kids must cost their parents a bundle. Hip is more expensive today. It was cheaper in the sixties when I lived in Haight-Ashbury. Relax, I'm not going into a hip nostalgia number. Just remembering. There's a black guy out there in front, babbling to himself. He's got a chartreuse blanket hanging around his neck like a scarf. He gets down and kisses the sidewalk. I've seen the guy around for several years. He never used to talk to himself. He's making progress. Lot of mentals on the street, thanks to Ronald Reagan's